

Prison package hailed

At signing ceremony, rehabilitation policy seen as a major shift.

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders promised a new era for California corrections Thursday, one where the prison system's operative philosophy of the past two decades -- warehousing inmates -- will give way to offering them a chance at rehabilitation.

At a signing ceremony on the Capitol's east steps, Schwarzenegger hailed the prison package contained in Assembly Bill 900 as representing a "monumental shift in how we manage prisons."

In the short term, the state is hoping that the \$7.9 billion plan that adds space for 53,000 prison and jail beds will dissuade federal judges from imposing population caps that could lead to early releases of inmates from California's jam-packed prisons. In the long run, the hope is that it will keep prisoners from reoffending.

"Our job is far from done," Schwarzenegger said. "We have made the commitment to provide the infrastructure we need to relieve overcrowding. And now we must follow through on the rehabilitation programs that we need to make sure that inmates who get released can lead productive, law-abiding lives so that our communities will stay safe."

At the end of the 2005-06 budget year, only 10,572 of the 171,900 inmates incarcerated at that time were enrolled in academic education programs and only 7,953 were in vocational programs. About 8,500 more prisoners were in drug treatment programs.

Under the bill Schwarzenegger signed Thursday, all of the proposed 40,000 new beds expected to come on line in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will be linked to mental health, vocational, education and drug-treatment programs.

Joan Petersilia, head of the University of California, Irvine, Center for Evidence-Based Corrections, said that AB 900 represents a "historic turning point for California," where 172,344 inmates are being housed in spaces designed for about half that many.

"We're going to build the space so people can learn jobs," Petersilia, who has worked as a consultant to the state prison system for the past three years, said at the signing ceremony. "We're going to increase their literacy rate. And we can provide good, solid substance abuse treatment programs."

Petersilia added, however, that "we should not underestimate the difficulty of implementing this package." In an interview afterward, she cited staff vacancies throughout the prison system, its culture of punishment-over-rehabilitation and skepticism in the public mind as critical barriers the state has to overcome to make the program work.

The plan calls for building space for 16,000 beds at existing prisons, 16,000 more at 30 or so "re-entry" centers to be located around the state and 8,000 additional beds at new correctional hospitals. The other 13,000 beds are slated for county jails, which are now releasing 18,000 inmates a month due to overcrowding.

Sacramento County is one of about 25 communities around the state that have expressed an interest in housing a re-entry facility. Its district attorney, Jan Scully, said in an interview she believes the public will support the idea.

"I think that citizens are always concerned about whether or not it's in their own neighborhood, so I think there is going to have to be a lot of discussion, and the community is going to have to feel that it's in their best interest to have such a facility close by," Scully said. "I think it's going to be important for the Board of Supervisors to hold public hearings and those kinds of things. There's going to be a lot of homework to do first."

Scully described herself as "a big proponent of re-entry opportunities" and said she would help to get one located in Sacramento.

The bill breaks the construction program into two phases. The second can only proceed if the state proves it has met the rehabilitation requirements in the first, 32,000-bed phase of the program.

The 16,000 new beds would go into 10 existing prisons around the state to replace emergency housing in which triple-bunked inmates are sleeping in gyms, dayrooms and classrooms.

AB 900 also includes legislative approval of Schwarzenegger's emergency plan to ship 8,000 inmates -- against their will, if necessary -- to out-of-state prisons. The transfer plan has been held up by lawsuits filed by the California Correctional Peace Officers Association and Service Employees International Union Local 1000.

Another provision in the bill will convert 4,000 existing prison beds into drug-treatment slots for inmates.

The bill contains an urgency provision that allows corrections officials to begin construction immediately. Schwarzenegger said Thursday he expects the construction to be completed within 18 months.

Opponents of the bill such as state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, said it represents just another prison construction plan for the state and that the administration missed a chance to incorporate a major sentencing overhaul and parole changes into the package, items that opponents said might reduce the need for new incarceration spaces in the future.

Schwarzenegger pledged Thursday that he is open to discussing sentencing and parole changes later in the legislative session. He also said he will continue to push a plan to relocate 4,500 nonviolent female offenders to community-based facilities to open up prison space to more dangerous offenders.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, said nobody got everything they wanted in AB 900. In signing the bill, Schwarzenegger made "a contract with the people of California" and "the Legislature is going to be watching" to make sure the prison agency follows through on the rehabilitation benchmarks, Nunez said.

"This would have been an easy problem to solve if we were simply willing to build prison after prison, like houses on a Monopoly board," Nunez said. "But we weren't."

Assembly Republican leader Mike Villines of Clovis said the package represents bipartisan cooperation at its finest.

"Republicans and Democrats put their differences aside," he said. "We put California first."

CHANGES AT A GLANCE

COST: \$7.9 billion

NUMBER OF NEW BEDS: 53,000 in all, at existing prisons, "re-entry" centers, new correctional hospitals and county jails. Of these beds, 40,000 are to be linked to rehabilitation programs.

OTHER PROVISIONS: Approval of governor's emergency plan to ship 8,000 inmates out of state, if necessary; conversion of 4,000 existing beds to drug-treatment programs.

DESIRED IMPACT: Prison changes would dissuade federal judges from imposing population caps; greater access to rehabilitation programs would keep inmates from reoffending.

To read the entire prison bill (AB 900), go to: www.sacbee.com/links

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